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Book Review: The Socialist Car: Automobility in the Eastern Bloc. Edited by Lewis H. Siegelbaum. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011.

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The Socialist Car: Automobility in the Eastern Bloc ed. by Lewis H. Siegelbaum (review)

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The Socialist Car: Automobility in the Eastern Bloc.

Edited by Lewis H. Siegelbaum. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2011. Pp. vi+242. $65.

In this exemplary volume, edited by noted Soviet historian Lewis Siegelbaum, the seemingly narrow topic of automobility in the Eastern Bloc becomes a window into aspects of history as varied as factory production, Communist Party politics, urban planning, and the domestic lives of women. Like most edited volumes, there are stronger and weaker chapters, but taken as a whole the collection is much more than just a sum of its parts. The everyday experiences of European socialism really come alive in these pages as the singular attention on the car allows the era's larger social, economic, and political issues to be highlighted and interrogated in multiple, convincing ways.

After a skilled introduction by Siegelbaum, the text is divided into three parts. The first is an exploration of the production, distribution, and consumption of cars. Using detailed archival records, Valentina Fava, Mariusz Jastrząb, and György Péteri look at the cases of Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Hungary, respectively. They discuss struggles to retain existing production capacity, address the high, unmet demand for personal cars, and direct the use of available cars to favored citizens. Fava opens the book with a study of the famed Škoda Auto and shows how its international knowledge base deteriorated after 1948, permanently damaging the sector's infrastructure. Jastrząb and Péteri discuss how gaining access to personal cars became a site of negotiation between the state and elites who never embraced what Péteri calls "an alternative, distinctly *socialist* form of motorization" (p. 48), such as the collective use of cars. Because of their more quantitative methodologies, the texts in this section may have more narrow appeal than some of the others, and irritatingly, Fava's chapter is poorly edited with incorrect Czech-language accents. But the fundamental information presented is essential to understanding how many cars were available, who had them, and how they got access to them.

The second part considers the relationship between mobility and the design and construction of cities. As Elke Beyer, Brigitte Le Normand, Esther Meier, and Eli Rubin show, socialist cities were imagined as automobile landscapes even if there were fewer automobiles on their streets than expected for many years. In the book's strongest set of texts, these authors show the influence of international trends in urban planning, particularly the work of the Swiss-French architect Le Corbusier, who, along with other members of CIAM (International Congress of Modern Architecture), promoted a vision of cities divided into functional zones connected by transportation arteries. Beyer compares planning practices in the GDR and the USSR, while the other chapters are case studies: Belgrade by

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Le Normand, Naberezhnye Chelny by Meier, and Berlin-Marzahn by Rubin. Readers interested in urban history will find useful and tantalizing information here that expands the possibilities for comparative study, especially on the planning of new towns. Some experts, particularly architectural historians, will be disappointed by the missing secondary literature on CIAM and Corbusian urbanism that could have helped the authors to situate these examples within broader debates on the design of twentieth-century cities. For example, none of the authors cite Eric Mumford's important *The CIAM Discourse on Urbanism, 1928–1960* (2002).

In the third section, the authors reflect on the intimate relationship between individuals and their vehicles. In chapters that touch on subjects as varied as everyday car culture, tinkerers, truck drivers, and housewives, Luminita Gatejel, Kurt Möser, Siegelbaum, and Corrina Kuhr-Korolev show the intimate side of automobility in studies of the people who drove and maintained these poorly made vehicles. Gatejel's ambitious, but in the end unconvincing, chapter argues for a "common heritage" that "gave rise to identical discourses" on "mass motorization" (p. 143) in the USSR, GDR, and Romania. In fact, in the context of the other ten chapters that show the wide disparity in use, availability, and quality of cars, the book reinforces the importance of comparative analysis of national case studies for scholarship on European socialism. Möser and Siegelbaum make use of popular media and firsthand accounts to investigate the experiences of owners and drivers, whose perspectives on automobility were directly connected with their struggles to keep their vehicles on the roads. In the final chapter, Kuhr-Korolev interviews women who were and are car owners or drivers, offering an unusual and nuanced perspective on the important social role of cars in the former Soviet Union.

Despite some unevenness, this book is a must-read for anyone interested in automobility or everyday life in the Eastern Bloc. Historians of business, technology and science, urban planning, elite politics, and gender will also find parts of the book compelling, particularly in expanding conversations about how the emerging literature on the Eastern Bloc and the Soviet Union can change global perspectives on the history of the twentieth century.

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